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‘THE CHILD SNAPSHOT’ - A TOOL FOR THE TRANSFER OF INFORMATION ON CHILDREN FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL.

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Abstract

The research outlined in this paper is part of a larger research study undertaken in Ireland by the Centre for Social and Educational Research, at Dublin Institute of Technology, funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010). The project involved a cluster of two designated disadvantaged primary schools and twelve feeder preschools, with a specific focus on developing processes for communication and collaboration between the two educational settings. The Bioecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) was the primary theoretical basis underpinning the project, given it’s acknowledgement of the shared systems of all the stakeholders. The development of the Child Snapshot [a tool for the transfer of information on the child from preschool to primary school] was undertaken with a view to supporting partnership between the two educational settings while also supporting the children making the transition between the two settings. This form was designed to capture the rich knowledge base developed at preschool level, and facilitate its efficient transfer across to the primary sector. Evaluation of the Child Snapshot form was overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of the process of development, and in terms of the transfer of information. It continues to be used in this area and other disadvantaged areas in Ireland. Ongoing development of the tool has found that it is easily adapted for wider application. In order to improve coordination and consistency in terms of passing information from the preschool to the primary sector nationwide application of such a tool is recommended.

The Irish context

Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six years. However, traditionally many children in the Republic start school at four years of age (OECD, 2004). A free preschool year was introduced for children in 2010. This scheme allows children to receive free pre-school provision of 3 hours per day, 5 days each week over a 38 week year (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013). The age requirements for that year mean that children will commence the free preschool year between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months so generally speaking most should be older than four when they commence formal schooling. However, it must be noted that there is still a strong likelihood that the youngest of this group will commence formal schooling well below the compulsory age of six years.

The first-entrants class is called the Junior Infant class, and usually commences on the first of September each year. Unlike the preschool, primary school classes are usually organized with one teacher, and most recent figures from the Department of Education report that almost one in four primary school children are in classes of 30 or more (RTE News Ireland, 2013). The kind of educational experiences that children are receiving in Irish infant classrooms and whether appropriate play-based learning experiences can be provided in these classes with current adult:child ratios and large class sizes has been questioned (O’Kane, 2007). Indeed, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (2012) highlights continuing concerns about the impact of budget cuts on class sizes. Nic Craith & Fay (2007) reported that findings from infant teacher focus groups suggest that a lot of activities are still teacher led in the infant classroom. It has been asserted that many Irish primary school classrooms are teacher-focused rather than child-friendly, with outdated design and facilities, unsuitable for modern teaching and learning (Darmody, Smyth & Doherty, 2010).

In the Irish educational system the preschool and primary school systems have developed very much as separate entities, and vary in several ways in terms of their objectives and

approaches to education. O’Kane (2007) identified a lack of communication between preschools and primary schools in Ireland, suggesting that there is little congruence in approaches to learning. It was clear that continuity of pedagogical approach, which would lead to optimal learning conditions for children was not taking place. The same project also identified a growing concern with the differences in culture and curricula in Irish preschools as compared to schools, and suggested that children can experience discontinuities in their learning as they move from one stage to the other. Such discontinuity can have a serious impact on the quality of school experience. Achieving a successful transition may be contingent on a degree of continuity between the two educational experiences. Minimising these risks through continuity at transition can enhance children’s learning experiences and later school success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Margetts, 2002).

There is no national policy in Ireland with regard to educational transitions. However, two frameworks have been introduced at a national level which it is hoped will increase connections in quality experiences and learning throughout early childhood. These are *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Education (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear*, the Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, 2009). In terms of policy with regard to the transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland, they have important implications. While *Síolta* provides national standards for quality focusing on the contexts in which children learn, *Aistear* focuses on curriculum and learning opportunities, providing principles for learning. *Aistear* is intended to complement existing curricular material and support a progression in learning from preschool through to primary school in terms of curriculum (Hayes, 2013). One of the recommendations of *Aistear* is that young children’s learning and previous experiences should be taken into consideration when planning new learning opportunities. In the absence of any formal national transitions policy they can be viewed as a step towards developing cross-sectoral links, and should create greater coherence across the two learning settings. Engagement across both sectors obviously is important, although the preschool sector has been engaging with *Aistear* since 2009, the primary sector has not engaged to the same extent. However, this situation is slowly changing, as the Association of Teachers’ Education Centres in Ireland have been working to support infant teachers in this regard, and have reported that now over 6,000 teachers have participated in *Aistear* training (Hough & Forster, 2013) which has resulted in an increase in play based learning in many infant classrooms (Nic Craith & Fay, 2013).

It has been identified that clear links exist between disadvantage and risk of difficulties during this important transition (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Brooker, 2002, 2005) and longer term life opportunities (Combat Poverty Agency, 2010). Given the above, and the limited cross-sectoral coordination and communication identified as weaknesses within the preschool and primary sectors in Ireland (DES, 2005; O’Kane, 2007) the aim of this project was to coordinate and enhance educational provision for children aged 3-4 years in a cluster of designated disadvantaged early childhood settings with an emphasis on the transition for children between preschool and primary settings. An essential element of the project was the development and evaluation of strategies to promote communication and continuity between the cluster of preschools and primary schools. One aspect of this was the development of the ‘Child Snapshot’.

Methodology

Development of the Child Snapshot

Participants in the development process comprised practitioners from a cluster of 12 preschools, 4 infant teachers from two primary schools, and 2 school principals, all located in a disadvantaged area in Dublin.

To ease the transition experience a mutual clarification of expectations in terms of the skill sets that support children making the transition and a clearer understanding of language use and meanings between the two educational spheres is necessary (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; O’Kane, 2007). Therefore it was agreed that an investigation into the professional language used in the preschool and primary school sectors should be the first step in the process of developing the Child Snapshot. With this in mind, practitioners from the preschools involved in the project and the infant teachers were invited to a series of focus group meetings where they discussed the skills that they considered to be most important for the children to possess on arrival at school, and the definitions of these skills. Once these had been agreed upon, practitioners from the 12 preschools and the 4 infant teachers completed a form defining each skill, and giving practical examples of these skills. Data from the forms were analysed and definitions of the skill sets were agreed by the group.

Once definitions had been agreed, the project participants began work on developing the Child Snapshot itself. It was agreed that the form needed to be user friendly for the preschool practitioners who would complete the form with parents, and also clear in terms of readability for the junior infant teachers. Five categories that were agreed to include on the form emerged from the skill sets, these were: Language and Communication skills; Social and Emotional skills; Independence and Self-help skills; Thinking skills; Fine and Gross Motor skills. Within each of these categories, 9 examples were agreed which were considered to give an overall reflection of the strengths of the child in that category.

Section 3: Independence and Self-help Skills		
I can finish a task by myself: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I can choose my own activity Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I am happy to try new things: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
I can follow directions: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I can use the bathroom and wash my hands Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I look after my things: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
I can manage my lunch well: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I tidy up after myself: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	I can happily work alone or with friends: Yes Still developing <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Any comments you would like to add on this child’s abilities in these areas: <hr/> <hr/>		

FIGURE 1 An example of a section from the Child Snapshot, relating to the area of Independence and Self-Help Skills.

Figure 1 provides an example of a section from the form. There was full agreement that the form should be positive in approach, and focus on the achievements of the child rather than work from a deficit model. The wording used in the form was debated, and time was spent considering the wording in terms of a positive approach. It was also agreed that the terminology should be easy to understand for parents. To some extent this was an exercise in compromise among the various stakeholders.

Once the Child Snapshot had been finalized the group worked on a Letter of Consent for parents which would accompany the form. Again consideration was given to appropriate wording, and language used that would be clear and easy to understand.

Implementation of the Child Snapshot

The preschool practitioners met with parents to complete the Child Snapshot forms during the months of May and June. Although there were some concerns that parents might be apprehensive about sharing information with the primary schools, all of the parents were happy to sign consent forms and have the information about their child passed to the school. The preschool practitioners noted an additional benefit in going through the forms with the parents. Specifically it was noted that the form had been useful in highlighting the strengths of the children with parents, and also highlighting the areas where the child could benefit from some extra support before starting school. For example, practitioners reported that parents often send their child to school aged 4 without really considering if the child has the necessary skills to succeed at school. It was also suggested that sometimes parents misunderstand the skills that are necessary for their children to have to succeed at primary school – often placing an emphasis on academics rather than the skill sets identified by the practitioners and teachers. It was noted that the form was a useful tool in this regard, as it prompted parents to consider the skills that the preschool practitioners and the infant teachers value:

Even in terms of talking to the parents, it made them focus too on the things that we are looking at to see if the child is really ready for school. If you sit with the parent while doing it, it helps them to focus on what they [the children] are capable of. It might also be useful to go through the form with the parent very early, so that they can help the child in any areas that are 'still developing'.
[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group]

It was decided that the most effective way to transfer the information to the school was face to face meetings. Therefore meetings were arranged for each preschool manager to meet with the relevant junior infant teacher(s) or in some cases the school principal to pass over the forms, and to answer any queries that arose. These meetings took place during the month of June, in the primary schools, in the hour after the infant classes finished for the day.

Findings

Evaluation of the development process

It was agreed from the outset that the development process of the Child Snapshot was an opportunity to bring preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes together in order to develop greater understandings and work towards a shared conceptual framework. It was intended that the process should be valuable to both groups in terms of allowing for a

sharing of pedagogical practice. It would assist the two groups of teachers in reaching out to each other and working together to develop a shared vision of education, and work towards providing opportunities to ease the transition for children between the two settings. At the commencement of the project the infant teachers did not know the names of their local preschools and had never met any of the staff. Some of the preschool practitioners had met the school principals, but none knew teaching staff. At the end of the process relationships had developed and both groups reported that they would feel comfortable phoning each other to discuss the progress of children making the transition.

The partnership process initiated during the project and worked on while developing the Child Snapshot form was evaluated through 2 focus group meetings after the process, principal interviews, and a formal evaluation sheet sent to all participants. The quantitative data from the evaluation sheet was overwhelmingly positive with 100% (13 completed forms were returned) of respondents reporting satisfaction with the process in terms of their understanding of the importance of the transition from preschool to primary school. Project participants [whether school principals, infant teachers, or preschool practitioners] also all spoke very positively at focus groups and interviews about the benefits of partnership. It was noted that the process in itself had been very worthwhile in terms of relationship building. During these focus groups the discussion often returned to the importance of the two groups having worked together on developing the document. The importance of working on the language used, and reaching agreement on definitions for skills was also noted. So although the document itself was viewed as being useful in terms of sharing of information, the actual process of development was considered to be of importance in its own right.

Evaluation of the Child Snapshot

Earlier in the project a nationwide questionnaire was conducted in which junior infant teachers were asked if they felt it would be useful to have specific information on children transferred from preschool to primary school, and 91% (n= 207) felt that this information would be useful (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010). These teachers highlighted that benefits were not only for teaching staff, but important for the children and parents themselves, as the following example highlights:

It is very important that the Junior Infant Teacher has as much information regarding the child’s needs, strengths, background and family situation to support the child as best she can during this transition [Junior Infant Teacher 012]

So it was clear that a well-developed tool would have wider application than the settings taking part in the research project alone.

Participants in this research project who worked on developing the Child Snapshot reported that it had a clear value in supporting children as they made the transition from one educational setting to another. Teachers were in agreement that the tool would be very useful to them in preparation for the new intake of pupils each September. They could see a clear benefit to the children in developing such a tool, and felt it would also be of benefit in terms of their own planning and preparation. The preschool practitioners saw the Child Snapshot as a format for them to share their knowledge base on each child with the primary sector. Staff from both sectors agreed that the transfer of information from preschool to primary level was important but acknowledged that this had not been put into practice in any real way prior to development of the Child Snapshot form (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010; 2013).

It's all about early intervention, for each child to reach their own potential. For understanding them and accepting them for who they are. It helps you zone in on what you need to do for an individual child. [Infant Teacher, Focus Group]

And in terms of what worked with a particular child, whatever that has been used already that works with the individual child, that is important. [Infant Teacher, Focus Group]

During the evaluation the issue of how best to transfer the information included in the Child Snapshot was also discussed. There was agreement that passing of information at a face to face meeting had been an important part of the process. From the perspective of the school, not only the relationship building, but also the information on children was found to be of great value.

It was definitely very useful, in terms of having all the information on the children. We informally have links at the other end, the primary-post-primary transition, that informal exchange of information, and it is very important, and it is equally important to have that exchange at the preschool-primary level. [School Principal 1, Interview]

Really it has been communication working at its best, and working at its best for everybody at both levels and the children themselves. [School Principal 2, Interview].

Discussion

As noted above, research indicates that children in disadvantaged areas are at risk of doing less well educationally than their better off counterparts. It is widely recognised that the preschool years provide the foundations on which the child's life-long learning journey are built. Strengthening the continuity between the educational experiences at preschool and school has been found to support such children in their later schooling. The transfer of information clearly has a value for the child in terms of their strengths being identified, and also identifying any extra supports the child might need in advance of school entry. The transfer also facilitated improved understanding for primary school teaching staff of the individual child's approach to learning, and information on how the child can be supported to continue learning.

Evaluation of the Child Snapshot has found that transfer of information between the preschool and primary setting is beneficial to all stakeholders in the process in the Irish context. Value in terms of facilitating a common understanding between preschool and primary school practitioners, and in terms of networking and collaboration between the two educational settings were identified. From the perspective of supporting parents, transfer documents have also proven valuable in facilitating a better understanding of the skills which children need to succeed in the school environment, and discussion on how these skill sets might be developed. In this regard transfer documentation helps to smooth the transition for children and their families preparing to enter the primary school system.

The principals and infant teachers of the two participating schools were keen to continue working with the form. There was a general consensus among the preschool practitioners in the project that they would be happy to take the lead in continuing use of the forms, and that they would be happy to initiate contact with all local schools to arrange transfer of information each June for the children moving to school each September. Furthermore participants agreed that the development process itself could be used in other disadvantaged areas as an exemplar of good practice and could be easily adapted for wider application.

Indeed it has since been used in other designated disadvantaged areas in Dublin and by other local transition projects across the country, including in the development of an Irish language transition form. Dissemination of the form continues in 2013 both in Dublin and nationally.

One of the recommendations from the project was that the transfer of information between the two educational settings be rolled out at a national level (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010, 2013). It was acknowledged that the economic situation in Ireland would have implications in terms of funding to support the project recommendations. However, the need to build on and extend the structures that were developed as part of the project was noted. In 2013, it seems that this will take place. The Department of Education and Skills [DES] has stated that the lack of consistency in transfer of data across all educational settings, from preschool through to secondary school, ‘contributes to potentially damaging discontinuities in the learning of students and the risk of students’ learning actually regressing’ (DES, 2011). They also note that the current policy where intervention in terms of support is focused on senior infant stage should commence earlier, and this will necessitate communication and sharing of information about children’s strengths and areas requiring support between ECCE settings and the primary school system (p. 49).

As part of the DES Literacy and Numeracy Strategy the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been assigned responsibility to:

Improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievement of students between all schools and state-funded ECCE settings by requiring all settings and schools to provide written reports in standard format to schools and settings to which students transfer (reports to be provided following admission of student to the new school/setting) (DES, 2011, p. 82).

In this regard, the NCCA have commenced the process for developing suitable reporting templates while the relevant government departments will make transfer of information a requirement. The Child Snapshot as a tool for sharing information will be considered as part of this review. A national requirement to share information will not only facilitate the progression of children who require additional support, but should ensure a clear progression between the different stages of children’s learning and development for all children making this transition.

Conclusion

Findings from this project have reinforced the belief that continuity at the point of transition is key to children achieving a successful transition, and the relevant stakeholders working together to support the transition is an important aspect of the process. Collaboration in terms of transferring information has been identified as of value in many ways. In particular the development of the Child Snapshot has been found useful in assisting parents recognise the key skills necessary for transition, assisting preschool staff in their work prior to transition, and facilitating primary school teachers in preparation and planning for individual children at this time of transition. It is recommended, drawing on the findings of this study, that more coordinated structures should be put into place nationally to facilitate communication between the two early years sectors. This would enhance the quality of the transition experience for children through curricular and pedagogical continuity and strengthen the impact of the preschool experience. To maximise the positive impact of quality preschool experiences, supports for the transition to the primary school environment need to be put in place. Benefits gained during early intervention may not automatically transfer to the new school context and

there is a need to support children's adjustment during their transition to school. The outcomes from this research study provide a timely contribution to developments in this critical aspect of early childhood education.

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